

X, Curator

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X had been traveling for what seemed centuries. He might be decades out of touch with the home office, not that he could ever have lost grasp of his purposes. The longer he ran out his assignment, the more purified the relationship between him and the objects of his pursuit. The world more and more came down just to him and those enigmatic relics he sought, the isolate treasures that delivered their essences only to his special gaze, those on which he made report and with which he sometimes abruptly absconded - assessor turned master thief at the drop of a hat - and which were otherwise arrayed as if part of the ordinary universe of artifacts. X barely noticed anything but the relics anymore. The rest was darkness, the inky milk of time. The human world legible only by implication.

X's work, the imperative of his visions, was enough to sustain him. Rarely even did a human voice pierce the caul of his obsession with the objects; a flight attendant asking if he'd change his seat so that members of a family could sit together, a desk clerk explaining that the strip on his credit card had become demagnetized: did he have another? X looked clean through these phantasms, no longer able to shorten his gaze to halt at the surfaces of bodies, unable to quit penetrating to the drear miniscule resonances already accumulating in a fountain pen or a keychain, or in a photocopy machine on a shelf behind the person speaking. Objects spoke more than persons now. In a thousand years, should these stray artifacts endure, they might have accumulated enough cosmic weight to be worthy of X's glance, even for being gathered up in the shadowy archives of his unseen handlers. For now, these fledgling objects were distractions, static on his screen. Somewhere, in this city where X had arrived, some singular statue or urn beckoned to him, radioactive with presence, metastatic with abandoned meaning. Not only did X possess a genuine calling, but if he was silent enough he could actually hear it, an involuntary whisper of inferences issued several centuries before. For X, the seer as bureaucrat, these echoes were his bona fides.

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The true conundrum, if X allowed himself to face it, was the point of origin of his assignment, and the nature of his employers. X had several theories he auditioned, during those moments of weakness when he was unable to keep speculation at bay, frequently on airplanes, with his eyes closed.

Possibly X served at the pleasure of a vast and dispassionate organization, a bureaucracy of curators at desks who filtered reports from curators in the field, and for many or even all of whom X's special advantages might be a rumor or forgotten, his talents never particularly cherished by the higher-ups in the organization, his conscription to their cause only grudging at best, his dossier gathering dust in Human Resources. The image that went with this possibility was of a pentagonal or hexagonal building, adrift in green fields, and with as great a portion of its mass underground as above, if not in fact a much greater portion, the building itself a metonym for the hidden depths in the objects the organization studied and hoarded. X a sporadic visitor to this Kafkaesque castle of indifference, until he'd come to understand that his absences went unremarked and unrecorded. Thenceforth he'd become self-authorizing, a free-ranger, letting his (ignored) dispatches stand in for his being.

The appeal and terror of this prospect was simple. X could slip through the world a solo operator, rendered, by the bigness and stupidity of a governmental-style task force, utterly alone. Under contract in some technical sense, yet answerable to no one in the end but himself. Unseen in his seeing. As isolated in the white noise of commercial travelers as his treasures were alone in their crowd of unvibrant object-companions.

Another possibility: X worked for an alien, god, or monster. Was, like the Silver Surfer employed by Galactus, a local emissary or appointed herald for some gigantic presence or force arrived on Earth from elsewhere, and whose indifference to anything but the treasures at hand - that is, of course, to the transparent persons flitting around the edges of such treasure - had invested itself over time into X's own attitudes toward the human species he still, rightly or wrongly, counted himself among.

X might merely be an extraterrestrial collector's eyes. The remote-sensing device of a treasure-eater from Mars or some further place. Perhaps ludicrous, this theory had the advantage of explaining the fact of his powers, his superseeing capacity for peering inside the skin of the world. As well as the fundamental alienation bestowed with such responsibilities.

Another, related conjecture was that X was employed by the objects themselves.

In this scenario, the treasure was a kind of giant collective mind, disassembled and decommissioned over the human centuries, but now longing for communion and reconnection. The unvocal yearning chorus, trapped in unambulatory bodies, jailed in mansions or museums, repositories of helpless cultural plunder or anthropological

evidence, had been calling, each to each other, to be gathered in one place, for what esoteric or eldritch purpose X couldn't fathom. Adrift in human time, these amnesiac artifacts had commissioned X as their human agent in this attempt at self-recollection. X, the human with the freakish talent, the penetrative gaze, enlisted as their emissary and agent among themselves. Their knight and champion, their uniter. Yet like any such foot soldier, X only knew what he needed to do his work, was quarantined in his cell of one from the longer agendas, the greater outcomes. Was likely destined to be discarded, too, by those he'd served, in whose company he'd never belong.

For if there was one thing X had come to understand it was that for everything his gaze revealed to him there remained limits, severe and unforgiving ones, to what the objects could tell him, and to how completely he could identify himself with and inside them. No matter that they were strange and he was strange. No matter that he loved them. To confuse himself with what he saw into, and with what he saw inside when he looked inside, was a mistake. The artifacts were not mirrors for him. That vanity had fled X, years before.

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For the uncertainties surrounding his commission, X recalled as if was yesterday the onset of his gift. First, of course, came the wishing. The wishes he wished hardly made him special. In fact, they made him as ordinary as any child of his century, perhaps of any child ever born, though the words and notions a child would have used to express this wishing in the time before the century of photography and radiology and the H-bomb would have been entirely different. Impossible for X to know, since he was wholly formed by those things, a generation's metaphorical framework. I want to see my bones inside my skin. I want to see through her clothes. Her dress, her underwear. I want to see through the walls and floors of my bedroom when I'm exiled in the dark and the grownups go on with their lives. I want to know what makes the television work. I want to know what makes the kitten work. I want to tease apart a stone or a cake of soap like it was a clock and see how the pieces fit together, if they still do.

The world even tantalized a boy like X with its suggestion that such things were readily available. He'd seen the ads, alongside those for ten-foot submarines and sea monkeys, promising eyeglasses that would deliver the vision he craved, though he knew to be skeptical of that age-blurred huckster's iconography. He might as well try not only to raise sea monkeys, but to fall in love with the pretty one. There were movies too, Ray Milland or Superman burning holes in bank vaults and lightly scandalized females. Teams of secret agents or rebellious vagrants who donned special Ray-Bans that

unmade the gauze of lies which coated the world, stripped away conspiracy to reveal the evil alien invaders who cavorted in the midst of oblivious humans. X's delusory hunger for eyes that unmasked the secret life might evidently be so universal an appetite as to lose its sacred appeal altogether. He didn't want to be just another fool, another actor, glaring and arching his eyebrow as though spotting something he couldn't, in on a secret that didn't exist. Yet just at the moment he felt this heretical disinterest, everything changed. X's father took him to the museum.

The building itself was a kind of conundrum of monumentality, an ark you entered through a porthole at the bottom, an Athens you invaded by means of the Trojan Horse of your self. X felt like an electron sliding into the gate of a collider, about to be expanded or imploded by some unfathomable science. Yet his fascination with these surroundings melted away instantly upon contact with the first of the artifacts susceptible to his gaze, the bronze statue that taught him how to see, or taught him that he already knew how but had not until this point encountered anything worth seeing. At this encounter, X's eyes graduated.

It was a horse. The sheeny bronze collapsed into a series of corridors and doorways, portals to an interior that was also an autobiography of the horse's making and its makers, a constellation of tiny views, map orientations and carbon signatures of its movement through the centuries and from its point of origin, a shadow of some forge on a hill, a rain-streaked granite pedestal, a half-eaten feast on a table under which some irresponsible emissary snored out a red wine hangover. The horse hummed with a wordless sense of its fate and journey that outshone the scatterbrained buzz of everyday circumstances. Soon enough it had companions, too. A chalice fingerprinted with interior architecture, a dense musical notation or mathematics X recognized without discovering its name. Two women made of marble, interiors laced with human trance leavings, with dream script.

Not every object in the museum spoke to X's new eyes, whether the failing was X's or that of the artifacts he would never be sure. Perhaps there were other seers free of some flaw or doubt who'd have found the whole museum, the whole world, lucid in this manner. As it was, dozens desublimated themselves into his gaze, while hundreds of others remained inert, at least for the time being. Possibly this was simply a matter of tolerances, a limit on what he could take. The majority simply slid off into the gray haze that encompassed the museum corridors and floors, the other patrons, his father.

The new capacity followed him out of the museum. Various items throbbed with secret vivacity, distracting him from various contexts to which X had been supposed to attend: a French teacher's onyx bracelet, the soda tap at the drugstore counter at Macy's where his grandmother liked to treat him to Saturday egg creams. Nothing with the potency of the museum's treasures, but how could they be expected to have attracted comparable resonances in so short a time? X felt a forgiveness toward the feebler emanations of the

newer items. It was enough that they stirred even slightly, their rustling presence suggesting they'd gained first inklings of their place in the historical pageant of objects.

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Never, though, was any person in any way enlivened or rendered translucent. The opposite instead. The clothing and skin with which human beings met the atmosphere might as well have been curtains of dull stone even to X's most lingering or hopeful glances. He grew more distant from his living fellows by default, as his relationship with the objects grew more enthralled and sensual. It was X's fate to live among the implicit traces of the dead, who were no more dead than the past was past. Yet though they weren't dead, the dead were somewhat more lonely than the living. It was precisely out of their isolation, and in order to slightly alleviate it, that they had located X with their siren call.

In his own loneliness, X yearned to know that others like him roamed the earth, sensitives distracted by the embedded potencies in select objects. A handful of cultural clues suggested he wasn't completely alone. The way Alfred Hitchcock lit a glass of milk and the very notion of the 'McGuffin'; Henry James constructing a fugue of a novel around the resonances locked inside that Golden Bowl; Stanley Kubrick's monolith. Sydney Greenstreet's rhapsodic covetousness of the Maltese Falcon, the lust in the fat man's eyes: even Humphrey Bogart, initially so skeptical that he dubs the Falcon 'the dingus', ends admitting it was the stuff that dreams are made of.

Yet by the time X was in the final term of a degree in art history - what else would do for him, he'd figured, but a career in the dark, floating his voice over luminous slides, trying to cause others to see what he saw? - he'd never met another seer, or at least never one who'd tipped their hand. X wondered if he gave any indications, himself, that another would detect. Probably not. He was given a jolt when a classmate, a brunette in bangs and funky cat glasses (a grown version of the type through whose dress his twelve-year-old self would most wish to have been able to see) offered up a disconcerting remark: "Keep in mind, you can't be deep without a surface!" He stared, wondering what she was getting at, but her smile was, as usual, opaque. The quip was almost reflexive, revealing less the more he considered it, yet, just as he might be about to dismiss it, seeming comprehensively relevant to his whole life. Was she being flirtatious? It seemed unlikely. Eventually he concluded from her lack of follow-up that the girl had meant nothing more than that he should attend to his personal grooming, which was admittedly atrocious. He took this to heart and reversed his slide towards dandruff, taped-glasses-frames, moth-eaten cardigans, and unboundaried facial hair. It was true

after all that any object worth his excavating glance possessed a beautiful exterior to begin with. From that day forward X was more or less a dandy, his wardrobe and hygiene impeccable. Far from distinguishing him, this tended to make him disappear even further. Women now did flirt with X, but he never noticed. He was too busy flirting with the infinite. With one ambiguous remark the girl had transformed X from a geek at the mercy of his visionary gift to a cosmological spy.

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To see the insides and the outsides of things at once was to expose the falsehood of their division into a binary system. To diagnose the unstable systems underlying the apparently placid surfaces of the stuff that decorated the universe was not to reveal it as unsupportable or sick, but the opposite: the more you saw the more you knew that matter was tenacious and heartfelt, committed to its own presence on Earth, precisely for the specific and often homely circumstance of its coming into being, and for the tenuous nature of its apparent permanence. X was no doctor or mechanic, and his vision consisted of no procedure. He hadn't enticed the horse in the museum to drink barium, after all. Nothing needed healing, only to be abided with, as he'd begun abiding with the horse in the first place. Time's elegant decay had only wanted to be cradled in his knowledge; the unfixable hardly wants to be tinkered with, and scoffs at the presumption.

X remembered a joke about a Buddha on a mountaintop, dealing with a mountain-climbing seeker's questions as to the nature of the universe. The Buddha had put the seeker off with the explanation that the world rested on the back of an elephant, and then, a second time, with the explanation that the first elephant rested on the back of another. Finally, exasperated at the seeker's reappearance, the Buddha blurted, "It's elephants all the way down." An analogous cartoon depicted a group of scientists examining the cells of a dog on a laboratory slide, discovering that the dog's microscopic cellular structure consisted of innumerable tiny dogs. X bore through his mission here among the objects the knowledge that such allegories barely touched on the root truths. Everything was made of itself and everything else at once, dogs made of dogs but also cats, the Buddha himself the topmost elephant. X knew that if he'd tried to explain that he had x-ray vision, after being laughed out of the room he'd have been expected to give out the secret names, to expose the meat of everyday life. To explain what lay beneath the skin, as if life was an apple, with a bright thin beguiling peel overlaying something more actual.

Yet it was no apple. It was an onion. To discover that layers could be disassembled was to discover that nothing existed but layers, that the onion formed around itself only, all surface, all depth at once. And like an onion, what such encounters called forth were salty tears, which among other things served as the simplest reminder that your own surface was unsealed, penetrated from within by what you'd never be able to hide from another human gaze in a million years. X, Curator, had arrayed himself for the world and was naked nonetheless, like the artifacts he surveyed. What they told X anytime he stopped to listen was that he was merely a speck in a constellation, a lump formed in space and fallen to Earth for a brief, unspecified duration. To walk this planet and see what else was afoot was to be seen in turn, seen in time. Never mind the pretensions of archives, photography, curation. X's gaze froze nothing, because nothing was frozen. The heart was magma.